

Date of Hearing: April 26, 2011

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Paul J. Cook, Chair

AB 557 (J.A. Perez) – As Introduced: February 16, 2011

SUBJECT: Veterans: National Guard: California Interagency Council on Veteran Services and Programs.

SUMMARY: This bill creates the California Interagency Council on Veteran Services and Programs, bringing together key stakeholders with the goal that the state's veterans service programs are administered and integrated with maximum efficacy and efficiency.

EXISTING LAW: This bill adds a new section to the Military and Veterans code as: SECTION 1. Article 8.3 (commencing with Section 999.90), Chapter 6 of Division 4.

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown.

COMMENTS: California is home to more than 2 million veterans, representing 9 percent of the total U.S. veteran population. Furthermore as the Nation draws down military presence in the Middle East, California is on the verge of experiencing the return of thousands of servicemembers who will need to be reintegrated back into the workforce and the community, an estimated 30,000 annual discharges from the active military, many of whom will be at increased risk of joblessness and unemployment, PTSD and mental health issues, homelessness, and suicide.

This bill implements one of the primary findings from a 2009 audit by the Bureau of State Audits (the "Audit") of the California Department of Veterans Affairs (Department). The Audit found that the Department provides few direct services to veterans (outside of its operation of six veteran homes and the CalVet home loan program) and that the Department has limited interaction and few formal agreements with other state agencies and departments that could provide additional services to veterans if done so in a coordinated and efficient manner. The Department has made efforts to improve in this area as evidenced by recent MOUs with various stakeholders. However, the Auditor recommended that Department adopt a more systematic process for identifying and prioritizing the entities with which the Department collaborates in order to adequately identify the service providers and stakeholders that could assist the Department in its efforts to increase veterans' awareness of available benefits and programs.

Another key finding from the Audit confirmed that California's veterans participate in federal disability and pension benefits at rates that are significantly lower than those in other states with large veteran populations. Of the \$7.1 billion spent by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs in California in federal fiscal year 2008, \$3.15 billion was in disability compensation and pension payments to veterans. These disability payments are direct to the veterans and generate a significant contribution to California's economy, averaging (according to the Audit) about \$9,800 annually for each veteran receiving benefits. Unfortunately, the Auditor estimated that only 12.86 % of eligible veterans in California participate in these programs, which trails the national average of 13.94%. This is also significantly lower than that of other states with large veteran populations such as Texas and Florida, which have participation rates of 16.73% and 14.88%, respectively. California's Legislative Analyst's Office estimated that if

California could increase its participation rate to the national average, \$220 million in benefit payments could be returned to the state and local economy and paid to our resident veterans and who need that money to support themselves and their families.

According to the author:

[T]his legislation has been introduced to establish the California Interagency Council on Veteran Services and Programs, which among other duties, would bring together key state agencies and departments, federal officials, legislative representatives, local governments and stakeholder organizations to ensure that the state's programs that serve veterans are efficiently administered and properly integrated with federal and local programs. Budget cuts to CVSO's and to other state outreach efforts necessitates even greater collaboration and coordination amongst government and non-government stakeholders, which the establishment of this council would assist with and support. Areas of emphasis will include: maximizing the use of federal funding available to support veteran programs; veteran housing and homelessness; mental health services; employment and job training; and increasing the state's participation rate in collecting federal veteran disability compensation and pension benefits.

This bill creates a forum and a structure, bringing together those stakeholders who are involved in programs that serve veterans and is in alignment with the recommendation of the Audit for a more systematic process for identifying and prioritizing the Department's collaborative efforts. It is reasonable to conclude that the Council will at the least promote communication and coordination between the stakeholders who work with and support veterans. It will also provide a single place where interested parties and the public may reach multiple veterans service providers/stakeholders at once. The meeting frequency of the Council decreases over time as foundational efforts are completed; it is not unduly burdensome on the participants.

Author's Amendments: The author has expressed an interest in amending the bill:

1. To include the California Department of Corrections as a member of the Council
2. To set as chair of the Council the Secretary of the Department; and
3. To add any co-authors who wish to be added to the bill.

Related Legislation: AB 1569 (2009, Committee on Veterans Affairs) This bill would have created a similar council but did not pass through the Senate.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support:

Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Department of California
Veterans Village of San Diego
American Legion-Department of California
AMVETS-Department of California
California Association of Veterans Service Officers
California Association of Veteran Service Agencies
California State Commanders Veterans Council
Military Officers Association of America, California Council of Chapters
Vietnam Veterans of America-California State Council
United States Veterans Initiative

Vietnam Veterans of California, Inc.
New Directions, Inc.
Swords to Plowshares

Opposition:

None.

Analysis Prepared by: John Spangler / V. A. / (916) 319-3550